

Budget woes may mean early juvenile releases

By Kristi Pihl, Herald staff writer

Budget cuts are forcing Benton-Franklin Juvenile Justice Center officials to make some tough choices, including early release for some juvenile criminals who have been sentenced to detention.

The counties cut the center's budget by 9.5 percent for this year, forcing cuts in both juvenile detention and probation staff. The center is to receive \$535,000 for 2010.

As a result, department officials say detention capacity has been sliced nearly in half and probation workloads have increased.

Terry Tanneberg, detention manager, said he had to lay off three full-time employees. That brought staffing to 17 corrections officers and four supervisors.

The maximum number of kids held in detention has been reduced from 60 to 35, said Sharon Paradis, juvenile justice center administrator. That means when the detention center is full and another juvenile is sentenced to detention someone else is let out early.

In the first two weeks of January, Tanneberg said, 15 youths were released early. He said if those who were released had more than five days left to serve, they were put on electronic monitoring for the remaining time. If there was less than five days to serve, the time was forgiven.

"Thirty-five is not a large number of kids for a bicounty region as large as ours," Tanneberg said.

For the last few weeks, the detention center population has been under 30, he said. Judges have been giving shorter sentences and this time of year usually has fewer inmates.

But the juvenile work release program is overloaded, said Dave Wheeler, probation manager. Despite the cut in detention capacity, space in work release hasn't been increased and the waiting time for youths to begin serving their time in the program is about two months.

That's a problem because detention works best when it's as close to the crime as possible, Wheeler said.

The juvenile probation counselor caseload was already over the recommended level and the loss of two counselors has increased the load, Paradis said. Ideally, caseload should include only 25 kids, she said. "We've never had 25."

Wheeler said caseload is now averaging 40 to 50 youths per counselor. This week, the court had 636 juveniles on probation, divided between 14 counselors.

"People are scrambling to try to keep up," he said.

The juvenile center has moved kids considered at low risk of re-offending from a probation counselor to a different department with less supervision. Paradis said that's OK because the less connection kids have with the system, the less likely they are to return.

Probation counselor Elizabeth Lee said she now works with 47 kids. She said the budget cuts mean she likely will spend less time with each youth. She also may not have time to meet weekly with the handful who need the most assistance.

Lee said she now may meet with those juveniles every other week, as she does with others. Policy requires a minimum of one face-to-face meeting a month.

Counselors make sure kids meet court requirements, including community service and paying restitution, fees and fines. Lee said she also tries to help the youths learn skills that keep them out of the system.

"These are kids that are going to continue to live in our community," she said.

Paradis said she worries juvenile crime in the counties will start increasing as the court staff spends less time with each kid. Last year, 1,185 felony and misdemeanor cases were filed in the bicounty juvenile court.

Juvenile center staff use methods shown to reduce recidivism, Paradis said. Those include aggression replacement training, a 10-week skills-building course and family therapy.

Just punishing juveniles for the crimes they commit won't change them, Paradis said. They have to be taught how to change.

Wheeler said the juvenile center staff works to help the youths succeed in school and the community. "I certainly believe that we are making a difference," he said, but he noted more could be done.

Only two therapists now provide family therapy after one was lost last year, and the waiting list has about 40 families on it, he said. "It's a service that I wish we could expand on."

Wheeler said an aggressive probation program for those with the highest risk of re-offending was reduced in 2006, and went from serving 40 kids at a time to 15.

And more cuts are expected. Juvenile court receives 30 percent of its funding from the state, Paradis said, and the Legislature is discussing cuts to that money now.

The department could receive \$80,000 or more from the state for 2010, depending on what happens in Olympia, she said.